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ABSTRACT

Much progress has been made in recent decades in improving the quality and quantity of speech competition. The forensic community has endorsed a justification of forensics that emphasizes its educational value. Some critics complain that current competition structure creates detachment from educational opportunities and leads to pandering to judges, but fails to teach adaptation to an audience. Furthermore, the problem-solution formula tends to dominate in competitions, while other persuasion patterns are downplayed. To increase the likelihood of achieving debate's educational purpose, planners can either add events requiring student experimentation with other organizational patterns or can change the approach to the persuasive speaking event. Adding such new events as inspirational speaking or courtroom advocacy merely addresses a symptom, not the problem itself. Experiential education, specifically Alverno College's Off Campus Experiential Learning Program, offers a useful model for improving the educational value of an activity. The program stresses three steps: (1) goal setting; (2) reading the environment (or, in the debate setting, audience analysis); and (3) reflecting. Such an approach can help underscore the educational purpose of debate competition. Consideration of the educational merit of persuasive speaking will contribute to its justification in the decades to come. (Nineteen references are attached.) (SG)

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Strategies for Coaching and Future Directions of Contest Persuasion

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As we enter the decade of the 1990's, forensic educators can look back with pride at the growth and refinement of individual events during the past several decades. Much progress has been made toward coordinating or cultivating efforts between forensic organizations to improve the quality and quantity of speech competition. Conferences such as the Second Developmental Conference on Forensics and the First Developmental Conference on Individual Events have helped forensic coaches and administrators identify strengths of the activity for purposes of justification and to target its weaknesses for improvement. Persuasive speaking is an individual event that has often been included in discussions of both the strengths and weaknesses of forensic competition. Persuasive speaking draws strength from its rich history as a competitive event. For example, the annual Interstate Oratory Contest dates back to 1874, and the current Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results publication chronicled more than 200 persuasive speaking contests during the 1989-1990 academic year (p. 20). While its history and consistency are admirable, recent critics are voicing concerns that many persuasive speeches heard at forensic tournaments suffer from problems such as failing to adhere to any standard set of ethical guidelines, being excessively influenced by judging preferences, and lacking in creativity.

Several authors have explored the ethical dimensions of today's contestants in persuasive speaking. Friedley (1983) reviews existing ethical criteria established for forensic competition and challenges the forensic community to more clearly outline its ethical guidelines, examine the uses of evidence in the competitive setting, and to be willing to hold student competitors accountable for their ethical choices concerning the use of evidence. Thomas and Hart (1983) points to a gap between the ethical standards of forensic competitors and judges, and the general educational goals of the communication discipline. Frank (1983) identifies a variety of questionable source citations in a final round of persuasive speaking at

the 1982 Individual Events Nationals. Reynolds (1983) describes the "dread disease" oration as a common, and somewhat repetitious type of contest speech that does, however, represent what the communication discipline views as good persuasive speech content. Benson and Friedley (1982) and Mills (1983) describe the influence dominant judging criteria has on the types of contest orations that students create. Sellnow and Ziegelmueller (1988) document the evolution of contest oratory during the1970's and caution coaches against losing too much of the emotional quality of "old fashioned oratory." Clearly, the persuasive speaking category has continued to foster a good deal of critical thought over the past decade.

Purpose

This essay is a response to two questions posed to me for this panel: "What do you think is the most serious weakness in contest persuasive speeches;" and "What are you doing, as a coach, to try to improve upon this weakness?" To answer this question, I begin by reviewing the justification for forensic education that has been established by the forensic community. Next, I outline my position that the proliferation of the problem-solution organizational pattern is a key concern in persuasive speaking contests. Finally, I describe how and why I believe the standards offered by experiential education can be used to reduce the excessive dependence on the problem-solution format.

Endorsed Justification

At the Second Developmental Conference on Forensics and at the Developmental Conference on Individual Events, members of the forensic community endorsed a justification of forensics that emphasizes its educational value. McBath (1984) and Murphy (1984) summarize some of the the ideas that were supported at the Second Developmental Conference on Forensics. McBath describes forensic activities as, "educational laboratories in which students experiment with skills and develop their own abilities and styles of argument" (p.10). Murphy

(1984) discusses individual events specifically when he states that forensic educators should try to "maximize [the] educational experience" for their students (p. 91). McBath describes this educational experience as having "unlimited potential for individual undergraduate development"(p. 6).

At the Developmental Conference on Individual Events, participants justified speech competition by referring to it as an extension of the classroom with relevance to real life. Haught (1989) states that individual events allow students to "further explore classroom concepts" (p. 37). Mills (1989) stresses the practical potential of individual events by describing such competition as a "'field experience' where theories propounded in classrooms can be tried and perfected (p. 39). Perhaps Hunt (1989) best summarizes the educational relevance of individual events when he claims that "communication classes in rhetoric and public address and oral interpretation reflect/teach theory and practice that are necessary and essential to life" (p. 34). If individual events competition is to meet these criteria of justification, the contestants should make use of the information they learn in their communication classes, and do so in a manner that is relevant to the real world experience.

Inflexible Organization as a Contradiction to the Educational Justification

A common complaint about current contest persuasive speeches concerns the overwhelming exploitation of the problem-solution pattern of organization. McKiernan (1989) indicates that competitors have a "detachment from the educational possibilities of the forensic activity as a whole (p. 42)." Dunlap (1989) suggests that the result of such a detachment is that "too many [students] learn to pander to a judge without learning the responsibility to adapt to an audience" (p. 46). An important example of this detachment from the established principles of public speaking concerns the disproportionate use of the problem-solution organizational pattern in contest persuasive speeches. Dunlap suggests that current

competitors adhere to an "internal criteria" of "clear solutions to life-threatening problems" (p. 46). The result is that the majority of students select a basic problem-solution format. Allen and Dennis (1989) compare this dependence on the problem-solution pattern to the common complaints about rhetorical criticism, "We hear a lot of comment about 'cookie-cutter' rhetorical criticism, but in fact, we hear more 'cookie-cutter' problem-solution patterns in persuasion than we do formulaic application in criticism" (p. 54). As Mills (1989) states, "there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach so long as it best reflects the intent and/or goals of the speech" (p. 40). Unfortunately, few students consider the variety of other reasonable patterns when writing their contest orations.

Support for the claim that contest persuasive speeches are dominated by the problem-solution format can be found in a recent study of interstate oratory speeches. McKelvey (1991) compared the organizational patterns of the speeches from the finalists at the National Interstate Oratorical Association's national tournament for the years 1988, 1989, and 1990 to the patterns discussed in a sample of eleven current introductory public speaking text books. He discovered 20 different persuasive patterns advocated by the authors of the texts. Yet, the only patterns used in the sample of competitive speeches were problem-solution and problem-cause-solution. Clearly, the finalists at this national tournament are taking a limited perspective on persuasive speech organization.

The proliferation of the problem-solution organizational pattern in persuasive speeches contradicts the forensic community's justification for individual events in two ways. First, the problem-solution pattern is only one of many organizational strategies discussed in public speaking, persuasion, and rhetoric classes. Consequently, the persuasive speaking event is not maximizing its potential to encourage the continued exploration of classroom concepts. The Speech Communication Association lists demonstrating "awareness of alternative organizational

patterns" and selecting "organizational patterns that are appropriate to the topic, audience, context, and purpose" as essential college sophomore speaking competencies (Quiantly, 1990). The false assumption that persuasive speech topics must be approached from a problem-solution perspective does little to develop these competencies. Second, students should not assume that the problem-solution format is always appropriate in the real world setting. The problem-solution pattern in forensics typically assumes that the audience does not have a clear understanding of the problem and its consequences. In fact, many competitors strive to find topics or angles on topics about which judges have heard relatively little. The tendency is to devote the majority of the speech to creating an alarming new fear or irritation in the minds of the audience that can be resolved quickly in two or three paragraphs. Sellnow and Ziegelmueller (1988) found, for example, that contest orators in the 1980's typically devoted less than 30% of their speeches to the solution segment. This experience will be of limited value when students are asked, in their future vocations, to advocate one solution over another in reference to a problem that is well understood by the audience. Experience with patterns of refutation or comparative-advantage, for example, would clearly be valuable in such instances. I admit that the problem-solution pattern is appropriate for many speaking situations in and out of the competitive setting. I simply believe that the persuasive speaking contest has, to a large extent, become a problem-solution contest. Few communication educators would endorse such a disproportionate emphasis on the problem-solution pattern in persuasion classes or units.

Suggestions for Avoiding Inflexible Organization

As is evident in the previous discussion, excessive dependence upon the problem-solution pattern contradicts the objectives established in the justification of forensic education. There are two general options available to forensic educators if they wish to alter the persuasive speaking event so that it is better able to meet its educational purpose. We can

create additional events that require our students to experiment with other organizational patterns, or we can change our approach to the persuasive speaking event.

New Events

Events such as Inspirational Speaking, Crisis Management Speaking, Courtroom Advocacy, and Public Relations Speaking have been proposed as a means for requiring students to move beyond the problem-solution format (Dunlap, 1989). Speech To Convince is a category that continues to be offered at several invitational tournaments each year (Hawkins, 1989). Such alternatives deserve attention, but I am concerned that they address a symptom of the problem rather than the problem itself. There is nothing inherent in the persuasive speaking category that leads students to depend upon the problem-solution format. The descriptions of the persuasive speaking event offered by the American Forensic Association and the National Forensic Association do not limit students to a problem-solution approach. The National Forensic Association's invitation to its individual events nationals states that persuasive speeches should be designed "to convince, to move to action, or to inspire on a significant issue" (C. L. Reynolds, personal communication, November, 1990). Similarly, the American Forensic Association's national individual events invitation states that entries in persuasive speaking may "inspire, reinforce or change beliefs, attitudes, values or actions of the audience" (M. T. Nicoli, personal communication, September 1, 1990). Since many individual events tournament directors make use of these national guidelines when composing their tournament invitations, we can assume that the decision to emphasize the problem-solution format is made by the students and coaches. Developing new events that require students to use organizational patterns other than problem-solution does not ensure that we are meeting our educational objective. There is no guarantee that such events would not result in the impulsive and disproportionate selection of other organizational patterns.

Experiential Education Approach

Any effort designed to overcome the lack of sensitivity and creativity in the organization of contest persuasive speeches must emphasize experimentation with persuasion theory and offer real world applications if it is to meet the justification standards of the forensic community. In an effort to overcome the temptation to focus excessively on a problem-solution format, I have moved closer to an experiential education approach to coaching contest persuasion. I became familiar with the teaching strategies of experiential education when I began working with the internship program in my department. I have found that taking this perspective has made me better able to meet both of the above criteria.

While there are many prescriptions and standards for what constitutes good experiential education, the approach developed for the Off-Campus Experiential Learning Program at Alverno College has proven useful to me. This program stresses three steps: 1) goal setting, 2) reading the environment, and 3) reflecting (Wutzdorff & Hutchings, 1988). The following paragraphs detail the way I have applied each of these steps to coaching persuasive speeches.

Goal Setting. Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) state that goal setting is an "important factor in students' ability to integrate their work into broader learning frameworks" (p. 65). The goals that students set for themselves are discussed with a supervising instructor to make certain that the goals are attainable and that they relate the new experiences to the material the students have already learned. I encourage my students to view the persuasive speaking event as an opportunity to share their feelings about an issue that concerns them. When we discuss goals, I insist that my students begin with a discussion of the issue. I ask them to tell me what changes they would like to see or avoid with regard to their topic. I next ask them to tell me what role a public speech to college students and professors might play in relation to the overall

outcomes they would like to see. When I began this process four years ago, my experienced persuasive speakers responded to these goal-oriented questions with blank stares. This process, which is recommended in many basic public speaking texts, causes frustration for students who have selected an approach to a topic simply because it is a "good fit" for what "judges like." I do not discourage students from setting competitive goals, however, I insist that the initial goals they set for their persuasive speaking experience be focused on the relationship between their topic and society. A few students who were unable to make this adjustment decided to approach other members of our staff for coaching. Most, however, have found such goal-setting discussions to be motivating.

The second area of goal-setting I use in the experiential approach concerns experimenting with the material students have learned in their classes. I ask students to tell me what type of organization, among other things, is most appropriate for contributing to the goals they have established. When I encounter students who have had limited or no communication coursework, I give them public speaking and persuasion materials to read. If my students can present a compelling case for using a problem-solution format, I do not resist. In nearly half of the cases, however, I find that my students select an organizational pattern other than problem-solution.

Reading the Environment. Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) describe reading the environment as viewing an experience in "untraditional ways" (p. 65). They recommend having students [who are engaged in experiential education] distance themselves from their own experience in an effort to better understand the situation as a whole. For the persuasive speaking experience, **I equate reading the environment with audience analysis.** I ask my students to consider both forensic and nonforensic audiences. I require my persuasive speakers to deliver their speeches to public speaking classes. After delivering their speeches, I

ask my persuasive speakers to discuss their speeches with the other students in the classes. These discussions focus on both the evidence and organization of the speeches. I find these discussions to be helpful for my students in two ways. First, my persuasive speakers receive feedback that relates to their noncompetitive goals. Nonforensic students often respond to speeches on a practical level. This type of discussion can enlighten persuasive speakers as to whether or not their messages are actually persuasive. Second, these discussions have, on occasion, helped my persuasive speakers realize the difference between competitive and persuasive strategies. Questions such as "What do the people say who don't agree with you?" and "Do you really think that solution will work?" are not uncommon in these classroom discussions. I do not insist that my persuasive speakers incorporate all of the suggestions they receive during these classroom discussions. I am, at minimum, satisfied to have their awareness of the distinction between competitive and persuasive strategies heightened. Interestingly, however, these classroom discussions often motivate my persuasive speakers to make subtle changes in the organization of their speeches. My persuasive speakers also tend to reflect on these discussions when they receive ballots from forensic judges that contradict each other. I have found that including a nonforensic audience in the refinement of competitive persuasive speeches has been a helpful means of ensuring that my students are reading their environment.

Reflecting. Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) state that in experiential learning we must be concerned with what our students do and how well they do it, but we must be even more concerned about what they are learning in the process (p. 66). To evaluate this learning process, they state that instructors should ask students to articulate, for themselves and for others, the knowledge and skills they have obtained and how they can apply such knowledge and skill to other contexts. I ask my persuasive speakers to reflect on what they have learned at

many points throughout the forensic season. Typically, such reflection works best if it takes place at least a day or two after a given contest. I find that the hours following a tournament are often consumed with reflection on winning and losing. It is typically not until the students have had some distance from a given tournament that they can reflect on what they have learned. I ask my students to reflect upon what their audiences are perceiving as strengths and weaknesses in their messages. We attempt to distinguish between comments that reflect on the social aspects of the speech and those which are specific to competition. I ask my students to reflect on the material they have learned in their classes and reading when they speculate as to why components of their messages fall in the categories of strengths and weaknesses. These discussions do not have to be formal. I try to encourage my students to make such reflection a habit. Even brief conversations about a comment on a ballot can foster such analytical thinking. Whenever possible, I try to continue this general reflection process with my students after they have graduated. I find great comfort in hearing recent graduates tell me that they are able to use what they learned about persuasion from forensic competition in their vocations. Similarly, I want to know if my graduates feel the skills they developed in forensic competition do not apply to their daily lives.

Viewing persuasive speaking as experiential education is one means of assuring that the activity meets the standards offered in the justification of forensics. Setting goals, analyzing competitive and noncompetitive audiences, and reflecting on the learning process can help students to think about their messages in terms of the overall education process. Many coaches follow similar steps to those I have outlined. I simply find that the experiential education literature provides a helpful basis for systematically clarifying the educational purpose of persuasive speaking.

Conclusion

It has not been my purpose in this essay to condemn the persuasive speaking event. Persuasive speaking contests offer students important opportunities to experience the exhilaration and frustration of the persuasion process. I simply feel that a large number of students are not tapping the full learning potential of the event. I am confident that by viewing persuasive speaking contests from a more experiential perspective, forensic educators can help their students to reach this potential. Such consideration of the educational merit of persuasive speaking will contribute to its justification in the decades to come.

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